Guidelines And Suggestions For Empathy Buddy Calls

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These are guidelines and suggestions to explore over the duration of the relationship with an empathy buddy. Take in what you can and come back to review this document regularly as needed.

1. I suggest you share about something important that is happening in your life. It can be a challenge or a celebration or some of both.

2. I recommend at least an hour for the partner call.

3. If there is anything you want your partner to know about how you enjoy being listened to and receiving empathy, let them know at the beginning of the call.

4. If you are feeling nervous and worried about doing it “right”, that is very normal. It will likely be helpful to let your partner know that you’re feeling nervous. It might be helpful to remind each other that you’re learning and practicing empathy together.

5. When you are the listener, please either offer empathy—feelings and needs guesses—or content reflection, especially what stood out from what they shared. Doing both is very supportive for sorting out thoughts and for deepening connection to feelings and needs.

6. If you are new to Nonviolent Communication, I suggest you keep a needs sheet handy. If you are having a difficult time finding the needs, pull out the needs sheet and find them together. You could say, “I’m not sure what your needs are, do you mind if I look at my needs sheet, or do you have an idea about what your needs are here?”

7. Remember to set aside non-empathy responses. See below for a reminder of non-empathy responses.

8. When we connect by phone, we lose some important parts of communication for the right hemisphere, like body language and eye contact and touch. One key point is to meet your partner, if you are able, in the feeling-energy being expressed. If your partner has sadness come up, then offering comforting and soothing sounds along with the empathy will be very helpful for the attachment circuits in the right hemisphere, unless your partner has asked for silence. Likewise, if your partner has excitement, or anger, or gratitude come alive, then matching that energy with your empathy and sounds, will be supportive for connection in the right hemisphere.

9. Also, for more connection, it will likely be helpful to share small chunks and pause to receive reflection and empathy so that the right hemisphere is reassured that someone is present and resonating. I will interrupt someone if I can’t take in all they’re saying or if I’m sensing that empathy would be helpful. I might say something like, “Would you be willing to pause for a minute? I really want to stay connected with what you’re sharing. Can I tell you what I’ve heard so far?”

10. In the spirit of learning and growth, I recommend having a little time at the end of each turn to give feedback to the one practicing empathy. Start with sharing a few things that really worked for you about how your partner gave empathy, and then let her know if there is anything you would have liked to be different.

Non-Empathy Responses

Gather Data
“Has this happened before?”
“How long has this been happening…?”

One-Up
Tell a story to make them feel ridiculous in having their problem.
“That’s nothing, one time I…”

Feed the Fire
Agree with them. Get them all wound up about their problem.
“Yeah, they are totally…"
"Yeah, that’s totally…”

Give Advice
Tell them your great idea about how to solve their problem.
“You know what you should do is…”

Story Telling
“I remember once when I…”

Don’t Feel/Shutting Down
Negate the way they are feeling.
“Oh don’t feel so _____.”
“It can’t be that bad.”
“You’re really making this much worse than it really is.”

Encourage
“I believe in you!”
“I know you’ll get through this.”
“Yes, you do what is right for you!”

Sympathy
“I totally know how you feel.”
“I feel really awful for you.”

Analyze
“You know what I think your problem is, is that you are too…”

Ordering
Tell the person what to do
“Well, don’t just sit there complaining about it, go…”

Educating
Persuading with logic, or lecturing
“You know, thinking that way can be really bad for your health.”

Distract/Avoid
Make a joke out of what they are saying.
Somehow find a way to avoid their feelings.
“Well, that’s life. What’s for lunch.”
“You sure like to learn things the hard way!”

Correcting the Story
“That’s not what I heard…”
“So-and-so told me that you…”

Consoling
“Poor you. That’s so awful."

Coaching
“What’s one thing you can do?”
“What would your higher self do?